

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

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INTERVIEWER: SUSAN THOMPSON, CHRISTOPH STROBEL

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T = THOMPSON

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Tape 08.41

T: . . . a few words about what your first impressions... when you first came to Lowell?

K: Yeah, that was thirteen years ago, 1995, it was February. Yeah, in the winter when I first came.... So hmm, then of course we visited Lowell a few years before then. Well, first it was a little chaotic 'cause it's, you know, I came from a big modern city like Chicago, where the street layout, and the city layout, were completely different from Lowell. So you come from a big to a small city. You know, it's an adjustment... more like moving to a suburb. But the big difference is that here, everywhere I go, you know; going to the restaurant, going to the store, all that kind of stuff, you hear more Southeast Asian languages, you know. Sometimes I think: "am I in the right place?" all that kind of stuff. [Laughs] Whereas in Chicago, wherever you go, you usually don't hear the Cambodian language [T: yeah, it's a much smaller population, isn't it?] Yeah, just highly concentrated in the north side. Oh Chicago! Yeah, here, often times, you go to school, you go to the stores, you go to the mall, all that kind of stuff, chances that you are gonna run into a Lao or a Cambodian. So in a way it's a surprise, but a pleasant surprise (T: yeah). You know the natural features as well they always remind me of home, like the Merrimack River. So there is a lot of riches behind the scene. You know, it just reminds me a lot of home. And in general, the whole New England area... there's forest, there's trees, and all that kind of stuff. So it reminded me a lot of home (T: yeah).

T: When you first came to Lowell, where did you live? Which part of the city?

K: I lived in [unclear] with a friend 'cause you know I couldn't find an apartment. Then I moved on to Concord, Mass and stayed there for, for a while. Then I decided well, you know, why

waste time, going back and forth, you know. So I finally found an apartment in Lowell after about a year and a half, you know, two years ago.

T: And you first came here and started to work?

K: That's correct, that's correct, yeah.

T: And your apartment in Lowell, where was it?

K: In the Highlands, yeah, upper Highlands, you know, close to Cross Point.

T: And you still live in the Highlands?

K: Yes, we still live in the Highlands. We bought a house in 2001, a two family, in Lowell so that we can have my parents with us as well.

T: Oh, that's nice. So you live with your parents, yourself, your wife and your children. (K: Right, right.) You have how many kids?

K: Four, four kids. This morning I was taking the oldest one to an interview at Andover Philips Academy. A nice school. We want the best for our kids because we didn't have the opportunity to do it when we were his age.

T: Do you think that the Cambodian community in Lowell is concentrated more in some neighborhoods than others, or it just seems to spread over the whole city?

K: It has been spreading out quite a bit in the past ten or eleven years. It used to be very concentrated in the, you know, the Acre neighborhood and Lowell Highlands and now it's sort of spreading out to, you know, not just in Lowell, but also to neighboring towns as well, to Dracut, Tyngsboro, Billerica, Chelmsford, Westford. So it's spreading out. Here in Lowell too, you know, there's, some families who bought their house at the, you know, where the Belvidere area ends and you know, into the Upper Highland area, that kind of stuff. So you know it's pretty much spreading out all over the place.

T: In terms of Cambodian businesses, is there any particular neighborhood that businesses tend to be more common?

K: Yeah in the Lowell Highlands area, around Clement Park, Cupples Square. Spreading out of the Acre area, Broadway, you know, Broadway Streets. On Chelmsford Street there is a pretty new Khmer restaurant there and a dental office. Then there are a couple of businesses around Chelmsford going to Cross Point including mechanic, laundromats, beauty salons and that kind of stuff. It's still really small, family-owned businesses, except the Broadway business. It's still owned by a family but it was expanded, a grocery, but you know it included others, photo studio and you know other businesses as well. But I like to see more growth because I think there's a need, there's demand. There hasn't been any, like a car dealer or you know, a high-end bar or

restaurant, where people will take a beer. I mean this is not an area where it is full of restaurants. Yeah, that's a big thing. But you know, maybe in the next five years or ten years.

T: Do you think most Cambodians in Lowell tend to do most of their shopping and things, you know, locally in Lowell or do they go to other places?

K: I think for groceries, for food all that kind of stuff they tend to do a lot in the area. They also go to mainstream stores. Well like my family, we shop regularly at Costco and other stores at the Nashua mall, just because they have, you know, the kind of food that our children like. (T: and it's cheaper) Right, right, so we do that. With clothing stores...it's pretty much...we go to mainstream stores, shopping malls. I think there is one furniture business owned by Cambodian-Americans and there are a few liquor stores. [Laughs] Once in a while I'll stop by and pick up, you know, a bottle of red wine or something. I'm not a big drinker, you know. Then of course restaurants, insurance agencies, you know, things of that nature. Then there's, I think there's one or two driving schools, but again it's small scale as well. Hmm, you know, Laundromats. Yeah, there's one on Westford and Chelmsford, and then motor shops and mechanics, you know. Again, it's still in Lowell in general, you know, and cars, you know, when it comes to a new, or a new hybrid car, they don't have a high capacity to sell it. Businesses tend to sort of grow in the area where there is a need in the community. They really, tailor to the non-English-speaking clientele. So a lot of folks just take their car to have a new engine put in at a Cambodian-American body shop. And jewelry, there's many jewelry shops too.

T: I remember some years ago, with the Coalition, all that we used to talk about, you know, the small businesses association and Lowell how...not many Cambodians felt very comfortable, you know, associating with them. But do you think that changed in the last few years? Do you think that many Cambodian businesses are getting more assistance or help from organizations like that?

K: I'm not so sure because, uh, you know, it's a cross, cross-cultural component and the way businesses run and operate, all that kind of stuff is somewhat different. You know, the Cambodian community lends each other free food and money to start out. You know we do a lot of things on a personal basis. And we do not like to really sign contracts. So there is still that element happening in the Cambodian community here. In their mind they know what to do, you know. [Laughs] So there is still elements of cultural difference and to some extent, I don't think, the Cambodian-American community, the business community, really puts into good use the existing infrastructures in Lowell.

T: Hmm, in terms of the Highlands too, just from living there, do you feel that there's much of sense of a kind of enclosed neighborhood, I mean, for example, do you participate in any, is there any Highlands (S: neighborhood association?), neighborhood association and that sort of thing? I mean do you, because that was one of the things that we were working on... this is for the Lowell National Historic Park. They want us to concentrate especially on the Highlands and Back Central area. I was just wondering what's your opinion about, you know, whether, to what degree is there a sense of community and neighborhood in the Highlands?

K: Hmm, I remember when I was in the neighborhood meetings. I haven't attended in a while. There has been some talk about, but it's just that, you know. So I just looked at my schedule and

made my schedule. I think there is diversity in that neighborhood. It's diverse. I don't think there is a formal structure or group that I'm aware of. Just, people come and go, you know, plus, a lot of the area is also rental properties.... I think that may be challenge as well. I think there's been some talk about getting together and that kind of stuff, just, you know, we neighbors come together. I mean one time there was sort of group in the community, when I was helping the Buddhist Temple on Cambridge Street and trying to do the bidding for. We put a bid to the organizers for the property, the former Notre Dame Church. Yeah, there was some sort of movement people that formed together, that kind of stuff, but that area was like, you know, (T: so that didn't work out?) Yeah, the temple was outbid by a private developer. We had one million dollars and the private company came up with one point five million, so they outbid us.

T: Do you think that the population in the Highlands is becoming more diverse over the years or how would you describe it in terms of different ethnic groups?

K: I think so. There is diversity...Just within my few houses...on the left-hand side there are Portuguese-Americans...a neighbor on the other side...I think they are Jewish, across the street. There are African-Americans and Cambodian-Americans. Down the street, I have my American friend, there's Lao-Americans, then Portuguese, then other Cambodians and other Cambodians. I see a lot more Southeast Asians buying their homes in that area.

T: Did you consider other neighborhoods when you were looking for a house? Did you consider other parts of Lowell?

K: We did, we looked around, looking for the size of the house, because we had to look for the family, looking whether there is a backyard, or driveway so that we can put our cars there, also easy access to the highway.... Then we spotted an old house where, you know, we had tall ceilings, I think it's nine foot or ten foot tall, you know, with three bedrooms, and the basement, was seven, eight, feet tall, we thought that...we can convert the basement, which I just completed, into a computer basement. So it was ideal and the price war will never end, so we thought let's buy. My wife initially wanted to buy a house some place else outside Lowell, just because of, a couple of friends who bought their houses in Tyngsboro, all that kind of stuff, and Dracut. Then I said, well, I won't go too far, you know, I work in Lowell, (T: does she work in Lowell too?) she works in Lowell too, yeah. The first two years, when we first had three children, she stayed at home with the kids. I was the one at work, but I didn't get as much as I wanted. She wanted to work too. So she works full-time as well.

T: What does she do?

K: She works as a medical interpreter as well as a medical specialist. It's not in her area of study, but it is something that supports our home, plus you know, between us, we have to take care of children as well. So in the morning we drop the kids at school, and in the afternoon she would go out and pick them up, so it's fine. (T: How old are the kids now?) Thirteen, eleven, nine and three. (T: wow, a lot to take care of.) We have three at school and one at home... stays with the grandparents. It's been working out.

T: So, I know that you were thinking about some musicals and having a Cambodian cultural center? Do you have any plans for that?

K: Well, it was a dream when we had the property on Jackson Street. We put a lot of energy and financial resources into designing it.

T: They sold the Jackson Street property and moved to somewhere near Cupples Square?

K: No, they moved it to Broadway, (S: where on Broadway now?) close to Branch Street and the Acre area, I think they rent the space there.

T: That's not a permanent space, or is it?

K: I heard that they were looking. You know, to buy some property. But the deal didn't go through. Our idea then.... A third was dedicated to the businesses development aspect, another third to developing a cultural center. A library, place for exhibits... also spaces dedicated to social services, to continue to help people to integrate into mainstream society by teaching them English skills, job skills, helping kids with their homework, taking care of the elderly, taking care of the very young, with the education center in Lowell. As well as health. The health services, that's why they integrated the clinic inside the building. That's part of the social services. And then looking at the business aspect, because any sustainable community development, we have to also develop the community, the economic aspect as well. So we felt at the time that people who have come through at work and want to start a business all that kind of stuff, we can teach them how to organize business. And if not, that whole business coalition, could teach them how to buy their first home and set aside money for education, and all that kind of stuff. It has to do with sort of looking at the long-term situation, because the theme itself has been focused on the whole aspect of helping people with resettlement and immediate need. How do we, how are kids successful in school? How do we get a job? Learn the English skills. The job skills and so forth.... So that has been the theme. I don't know what the current agenda is, or the thinking at the center. But it has been my long interest and passion and dream.

T: So what about politics in Lowell? What's your feeling?

K: I think there are sort of two trends in politics. One is sort of homeland politics, still going on, the other is the politics in Lowell. The elderly, the older population, the males, they are thinking of homeland politics. The younger generation, my generation, tends to think more of the politics here. But even the politics here, we sort of have a long way to go, you know, it's up hill, there's really a long way to go... The way to see it is that Cambodian-Americans still have a very low social economic status. Therefore they are unable to put into, or adapt to, or use the existing infrastructures, the political structure in the US for the benefit of the community. So I think this is how I look at it. But again I mean, we have tried, you know, there's a number of Cambodian-Americans who have tried to run for school committee, run for city council, all that kind of stuff. You know, there hasn't been anyone. I haven't seen anyone who really can come up, you know, who has the potential to run a successful campaign because the money is gonna run out -- a lot of need for financial support, a lot of grass-root activity... We do not have the luxury, do not have the back-up, the disposable income to just do that. And there has been a lot of people who have

come up to me and said “Why don’t you run”, and that kind of stuff. Yes I’m running for my life right now! [Laughs] But when I look at the family, I still have four young children, my wife is working it’s not fair. (T: maybe when the kids are a little older.) Right, right. That’s right. I mean, it’s my city and the Cambodian-Americans make up a good chunk of the population. Why not have a Cambodian-American be present at the table, at the chamber of the city council. All that kind of stuff.... I intend to do that, but it’s just my timing is not there yet. I wanna take care of my kids and my family first.

T: It’s a good idea. (S: That makes sense.) And it seems that this is a nice position here, so is this, hmm, as we have seen before, a care program?

K: Yes, it’s a talent search and an upward bound program. It’s a pre-college program, and this program has been existing for fifteen, sixteen years already. So there is stability there, and of course I sort of am changing the ways to continue to help the community. But sort of from the mainstream perspective. Sort of a mainstream institutional perspective. Instead of, you know, now from the classroom and from the community. So that’s my philosophy, the paradigm somewhat changed a little bit. But still with the passion, still with the commitment to the community. So I find the job to be really satisfying. And it fits into my personal and professional reasons as well-- that is to help the community. So I feel that working with the students here, juniors and seniors, poor, from low-income, first generation, help them to go to college. In four or five years, these kids are going to graduate from college, wow! So it’s... instead of just helping the elderly, you know... help the younger population as well. So it’s been working out very well and I’m really pleased that students have come forward, you know, UMass Lowell, the Lowell National Park, Middlesex. The city of Lowell itself as well as other institutions, mainstream organizations here came together somehow.

T: What’s happening to Cambodian Expressions. You know it went on for a few years within Middlesex. I heard they kind of ran out of funding. Is it ok for you to share?

K: Yeah, we’ll continue with small activities. We’ll continue through this April. We’ll be focusing on films, documentary films... Last year we had the Cambodian opera. So we want to have different activities. Not just you know, not have the same old thing again and again. (T: That’s a good idea.) So that’s our goal. Plus I’m also going back to school as well....

T: What are you studying?

K: Master’s degree in education. (T: That’s great. At UMass Lowell?) You know, that’s what I’m looking at. I have my management degree, but I want to learn more about the whole school system...the education system...

T: And I think that the scale of the program too, it links up, like we were saying, with Middlesex. I remember sometimes we have students that will be part of that.

K: Yes, yes. It’s, you know...the program itself is a Middlesex program, but we have the office here. So we’ll connect because we’ll have students who go anywhere. Middlesex is one, UMass Lowell, but a lot of students are going to school outside Lowell.

T: But you start working with kids when they are in junior high...try to help them so that they can...?

K: Right, right. We have two programs: one is federal, one for the state. The federal is being conducted by UMass Lowell, and the one for the state is by MCC. But it's sort of parallel, you know... We have collaborations with the middle school as well. And then they come, you know, those who come to Lowell High School are eligible to continue the program.

T: All right, let's see. Oh, just a few questions about, your family, how you stay together. Do you have many family members back in Cambodia that you keep in touch with? Have you traveled back to Cambodia since you came here?

K: Yeah, I've been to Cambodia twice, in 2000 and in 2001... Well, in 1991 and 2000, with the delegates here in Lowell. One was with, you know, a sort of a cultural group delegation with the Cambodian moving art. And then another one was with the Lowell Delegation including the congressional delegation as well as school superintendents, National Park superintendents and folks from UMass Lowell, folks from Middlesex, and also you know, state legislator, aid coordinators as well. The goal was to establish sister cities between Lowell, because Lowell is the home to the second largest Cambodian-American population in the country, and three Cambodian cities, including Phnom Penh. That was in 2001. And since 9/11 happened, there was a change...all that kind of stuff. So it hadn't been really implemented yet, the agreement, all that kind of stuff. You know, Cambodia really sees change as well. So there has been interest among Lowell residents here again and there have been efforts at trying to sponsor at least two Cambodian students from Cambodia to study here. They start with Lowell High School first and then go to Middlesex and then go on to UMass Lowell.

T: Do you feel you are pretty much settled here in Lowell, you don't envision yourself moving back to Cambodia at some point?

K: It's hard to say. [K laughs] Well, I think I'm going to settle here for a while. Having a young family here, I want to complete my education and that kind of stuff. My wife and I contemplate perhaps after they are all done with school, and we are really tired, we can travel. And that traveling can include some part of Cambodia. Maybe we can go and teach Cambodians for a semester or two. Maybe have a winter holiday.... We talked about it. Right now the focus is really on taking care of the kids and being with elderly parents here, so we want to take care of them. Just continue to learn and do personal development.

T: There is one more question about politics. Do you feel that there are ethnic tensions in Lowell at this point? I know in an earlier interview you mentioned that there was considerable tension and also sometimes discrimination against Cambodians. Do you think that things have changed much since 1995?

K: There has been a lot of change. To be honest, the designation of the city as the all-American city.... Because of that, and in large part, because of the success of the water festival, there has been a lot of change. The media and all that kind of stuff, they embrace the Cambodian-

American community and the Southeast Asian Community as part of the cultural fabric of the city. You know, looking at it for a while now. There has been a lot of change...Physical change as well. Namely the lay of the streets. When I first came here, I had a hard time finding places, particularly in Lowell. Like a few blocks with one name, while a lot of names just threw me... There were no street names... There used to be a lot of Southeast Asian youth gangs fighting and that kind of stuff. So that's the reason why the community leader came together and created the charter school. The Lowell charter school responded to the needs of the community when people came together and asked what was the real cause of this fighting and why.... There hasn't been any curriculum that is teaching the history of immigrants. We felt that the only way to do that is another opportunity through the Department of Education. They had this funding available for charter schools in Lowell. So we went up there and that's resolved. That's how we respond.... To address the sort of ethnic tension..... By creating schools where they integrate into the curriculum the history of the immigrants in the communities. They take Spanish courses to embrace their cultural heritage. While emphasizing the English language and of course passing on the old customs, all that kind of stuff. It is also integrated, which is a very great idea.

T: Yeah, I think it's important to let the kids know about their heritage...Do you find that there's much relation between kids that are in those programs and lower rates of gang involvement?

K: Well, you know, that's one aspect. And also at the same time, it took me over a year and a half to lobby. Well, lobby is not a right word. But really to advocate the school and the committee in Lowell to include a Khmer language program, and also other language programs, at Lowell High School. You know there used to be none. Massachusetts required students to complete two-year foreign language to graduate. A lot of kids will take French, Spanish, Portuguese and all that kind of stuff. But one third, thirty-three percent of Lowell High School students were of Cambodian origin. Why in the world? No money, that kind of stuff.... So it took us, you know, like a year and a half, to organize the petition and get the parents to sign, get the students to sign. So you know, finally we got the language -- the Khmer language program. There are three full-time Khmer teachers here. There's, I think four or five hundred students taking Khmer language classes. Two-year Khmer, and others who take Spanish, French, Latin, you know. So to a certain extent, that also helps as well. Because it sort of helps them to have a certain kind of belonging, and to be more collaborative, support one another, and all that kind of stuff. And you know, support each other, and other lessons, and there's other things going on. You know certainly they wouldn't want to talk Khmer with their parents, but they wouldn't mind to sit among peers. One of the programs is helping kids train in traditional dance. But at the same time, they are also learn about history, culture, respect. So that helps individual families, to help their kids as well. Still, there's more to do.

T: I think we've covered a lot of stuff. What has been your relationship with the Park? Like have you participated in many of the events they had, or do you go there?

K: Usually I go to the work and call it the park. [Laughs]

T: [Laughs] Ok, I know, I mean, they have exhibitions about the Southeast Asian Water Festival.

K: [Laughs] Usually that's what I do. I sort of find something and call them.

T: I mean is there any exhibit you would like to see there that they don't have?

K: There have been Cambodian exhibition for four years. They let us use the special fee to do the exhibits there. It's a really nice thing. Not only just space, but also the attending assistance as well. Because some of the things we don't know how, is how to put it together. So a lot of great assistance there, including Mehmed Ali, the National Park and all the staff make themselves available. You know, all resources, open doors for us. So it's been really good. And I've been to a number of the exhibits as well. I'm not sure if other Cambodian-Americans are as actively searching to participate, but I know that we also make the National Park to be more sensitive to our needs as well. So that's the reason why we particularly choose the National Park's space to hold the exhibit. We had the film screening there so that the community could see it. Usually they wouldn't just come out and say, well, "let's go to the National Park." You know, it's like "who's there?" So I think they also have increased the foot traffic as a result. The National Park decided to hire a Cambodian-American who used to be my assistant. Now she works as a full-time employee at the National Park as park ranger. So that's a big investment. I think that's, you know, the Park sees the need of the community and hmm. Again, I mean, the Park was interested at the time in helping us with those sort of the design the cultural center. The same thing with the Lowell Textile Museum as well, and they are also happy to do whatever it takes.... You know, UMass Lowell and Middlesex do more. Of course they can do a whole lot more. I think they are beginning to recognize it and want to do what they can to help the community by hiring Cambodian-Americans. That is very challenging as well, because we really have an interest in working with all the ethnic communities. I think that's a good thing.

T: Ok, that's good. All right, so, Christoph, do you have any other questions?

S: I think this was very instructive and very helpful. Thank you so much for your time.

K: No problem, no problem.

T: I guess the only last question that we didn't ask is what are your dreams now for the future, in terms of (K: wow!), if you could do anything for Lowell (K: the jar pot). Yeah, the jar pot! What would you do for Lowell, what would you do for yourself, your family, your homeland?

K: Yeah, a lot of things. Take good care of the family. That is why I want to dedicate a lot of time, sort of downsizing all my, most of my community involvement, sort of focusing on the family, be available to them, with their homework, you know, be a full-time dad. This morning, as I said I took my son over to Andover Philip Academy and picked him up. I have a lot of dreams. Dreams for Lowell. The Lowell Cambodian-American community. Lowell in general. The Cambodian Center, a community center, and all the civic activities, a sort of a travelling Cambodian exhibit. Works of art, a series of lectures, something that links to Cambodia. And of course we only do that once a year, in the middle of April because the middle of April is sort of unique because it is celebrating the Cambodian New Year, but also that's when the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia and turned Cambodia up-side-down, to hell. I also want to remember that as well. There's two million lives lost because of the draconian society, all that kind of stuff.

But we want to extend that throughout the year, maybe having it year-round. Last year we experimented along with the opera. We experimented with community conversations. We talked about different topics – we talked about women issues; we talked about man issues; we talked about, you know, what it's like to be a Cambodian-American student here in America, here in Lowell; we talked about what's cooking, you know, Cambodian cooking, what does it mean, and why. So we want to have that kind of series, but interest and inspire the young kids.

T: Thank you so much, really.

K: You are welcome.

T: We really appreciate your time.

K: No problem.

S: Thank you.